

The Ballarat Naturalist

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Guest Speaker Report: February 7th, 2025

Forty years of Ballarat Bird-watching, 1983-2023

Amanda Ashton, the Publicity Officer of BirdLife Ballarat and member of the branch for 31 years and counting, presented an engaging and inspiring account of the group's first forty years (under three names), a milestone celebrated in December 2023. Known as the Ballarat branch of the Bird Observers Club of Australia (BOCA) from 1983-2007, the overarching Club's name was first changed to Bird Observation and Conservation Australia (still the same acronym but better recognising the Club's involvement in bird conservation) in 2007 and then to BirdLife Australia in 2012 when BOCA merged with the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU).

Local bird watchers who simply wanted to watch birds in the company of other people first met in May 1983 to discuss forming a Ballarat Branch of Bird Observers Club of Australia (BOCA). One month later on 14th June, the inaugural Branch meeting was attended by 20 people who signed up as members. Many of those original members are familiar to the field nat's too, with quite a few of them already belonging to the FNCB, including our President at the time, Dr Frank Harrap, our Club Secretary Helen Burgess and current Life Member Roger Thomas. Another seven members had joined by the end of 1983, and five of them were already members of our Club. This cross-over continues today between our clubs. Many original and early members remained active in the club for as long as their health allowed it, and there are still a number of people associated with these early days that are members today.

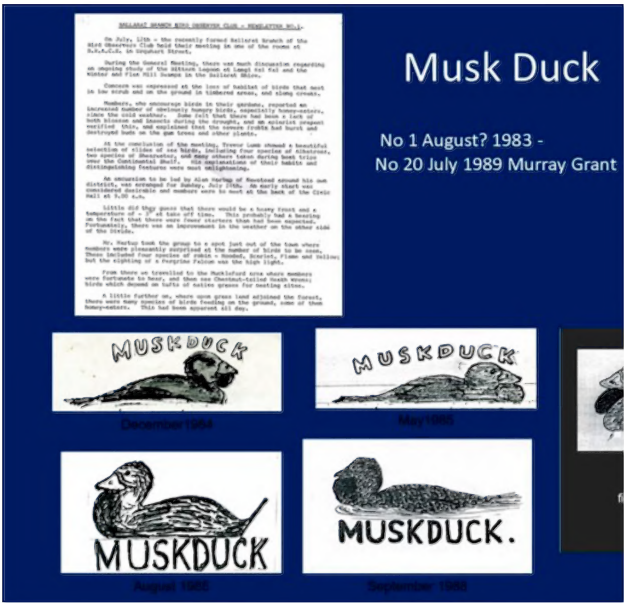
Before the first meeting was declared "closed", those attending had already decided to start their first conservation project at Bittern Lagoon with a view to protecting and restoring Brolga habitat. It was to be the first of many conservation projects. Their first outing was to Trawalla, although the first outing that was written up was a month later to Newstead, still a popular destination for the Branch. The Committee has remained strong over the Branch's history, and members are very thankful to all who have served on it, with Amanda making the smiling observation that Secretaries and Treasurers seem to have much more staying power than Presidents, given that there have been more than twice the number of presidents as other office bearers. Helen O'Donnell's extraordinary 20-year

stint as Secretary was a stand-out, and many of the stories, records and photos in Amanda’s presentation were largely thanks to Helen’s efforts as the Club’s historian and archivist. Again, many of those who have served on the Branch’s Committee have also been or are still members of FNCB. Amanda highlighted Roger Thomas’ contributions. He had served as President of the Branch for four and a half years and was awarded honorary Life Membership in December 2023. A long-time moderator of Branch bird-lists with Ian Ashton and Murray Grant, he has led many field trips and answered countless bird questions. He has also received a BOCA Distinguished Service Award and been recognised as a fifty-year member of the parent organisation.

The Branch generally followed the lead of the FNCB as far as venues for meetings go and still meets in the same room as us, at the Federation University building on the second Tuesday of each month. They generally have a guest speaker on a bird-related theme who may be a Branch member, researcher, PhD student, author, artist, tour leader, photographer, member of another Branch or a local land manager. They also have “show and tell” and several entertaining quizzes each year to keep members on their toes. They range far and wide on monthly outings. Their most regularly visited destinations include Maryborough, Lake Wendouree (where they can now access the mud islands and reed beds in the middle of the lake in kayaks), Clunes and Clarksdale Bird Sanctuary in Linton which was established by life-long BOCA member Mr Gordon Clarke AO.

They take the opportunity to explore those areas more than a day trip away by holding a couple of camps each year and have managed to cover much of Victoria, experiencing all weathers.

The Club established its newsletter “Musk Duck” in 1983. It has evolved from black and white with very few photos to full colour and many photos. It features write-ups of all of the Club’s activities, projects and special sightings. The Club logo, designed by Branch member Murray Grant, has also evolved as his artwork has evolved, with the current simple, eye-catching logo the result of him entering his “minimalist period”.



Amanda noted that Shirley Faull, another cross-over member, deserved enormous thanks for writing up most presentations by guest speakers for the newsletter.

The Branch also has a website with basic information about the club, meetings & other activities and digital copies of the newsletter. More information will be added soon. Comprehensive bird lists for many of their favourite and oft-visited locations have been collated from member records for decades and are available from the Secretary (up-to-date contact details available on the website). The areas covered range from the large-scale, i.e., birds recorded within 40km radius of Ballarat, to the site-specific for places like Lakes Wendouree, Burrumbeet & Learmonth, Mullawallah Wetlands, Ditchfield Lane, Paul's Wetland, Woowookarung Regional Park, Mt Beckworth and Clarksdale.



Many people who became members of the Branch were involved out at Clarksdale Bird Sanctuary even before the Branch was formed and a great relationship continues. They have always enjoyed strong support from the rangers (themselves all Branch members) for Branch outings, an Open Day in 2001, camps and opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the Sanctuary, and have in turn given the Sanctuary much support through working bees, donations, Committee of Management involvement, quarterly surveys and special projects like waterpoints, bird hides, fauna surveys and walking trails.

In 1996, the Branch was invited to conduct bird counts at the National Trust Property “Mooramong”, west of Skipton and these continued annually until 2009. Although not set-up as a scientific study, the results were of interest to the Eastern Barred Bandicoot reintroduction work and showed that both bird and bandicoot numbers fluctuated primarily in response to rainfall, not foxes which were essentially a constant factor.

The Challenge Bird Count, now known by members as the December Bird Count, was originally conducted in 1985 as a BOCA activity and competition aimed at getting different clubs involved in surveys. It was revived in 1995 and the Branch has been doing annual counts ever since on the first Saturday of December. Initially there was only one team in Ballarat who covered as much territory as possible in a day but in 2007 the count was expanded to several teams of club members each covering different areas. It provides a great annual snapshot of birds in the region and is a lot of fun.

The Branch has been involved in various conservation activities since its establishment, including surveys of threatened species like Swift Parrots, Orange-bellied Parrots and Snipe. Branch member knowledge and bird records are regularly used to inform recommendations and advocate for appropriate consideration of bird habitat in land management planning. Examples include the Lake Wendouree Master Plan, Ditchfield Lane planned burns and inappropriate development proposals, Lake Burrumbeet Master Plan, Mullawallah Wetland and Woookarung Regional Park planning. BirdLife Ballarat gets involved in *Clean Up Australia Day* activities at one of their favourite sites each March and was involved for many years in City of Ballarat’s *Adopt a Shoreline* program at Lake Wendouree under the able guidance of the late Ken Hammond.

Education is an important aspect of the Branch’s role, beginning by mentoring newer bird-watchers, continuing into more formal areas with various local secondary schools, Bush Kinder, Botanikids at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens & U3A and extending into the community, often in partnership with other groups like the Golden City Paddle Steamer Museum Society and Leigh Catchment Group. The Bird Week Walk at Lake Wendouree has become a much-loved annual event since it was first run in 1995, for many years expertly-led by Roger Thomas. It invites members of the public to join the group to learn more about the birds on their doorstep, and many have braved inclement weather over the years to participate. Attendees regularly express their amazement at the beauty and range of birds they suddenly see “with new eyes”.

The “Covid Years” and lockdowns saw a tenfold increase in the popularity of bird-watching as the wider population discovered the

pleasure, wonder, social and emotional benefits it provides that Branch members had been enjoying for years. Ian Ashton instigated “BirdLife in Isolation”, a garden/ backyard bird survey that helped keep members connected throughout lockdown. Although many meetings were cancelled, Branch members were fortunate to be able to continue some carefully socially-distanced outings when restrictions permitted.

The digital age of photography has revolutionised bird-watching. Happily, the days of trying to remember the key features of a bird or its call until you got home to try to find it in a book or ask someone are gone. Now photos can be readily shared with skilled birders generally enabling quick identification and providing evidence of unusual sightings. This has led to the addition of many birds to the Branch’s species lists.

Half-day, mid-week outings suitable for all abilities and fitness levels are a relatively recent, popular addition to BirdLife Ballarat’s activities. Even more recent is the introduction of the Branch Facebook page which has been warmly embraced by bird photographers in the club and the wider community, enabling fabulous photos to be shared and bird i.d. challenges to be answered. In reflecting on the Club’s history, it was very evident that by contributing their knowledge and observations of birds & their habitat by members over four decades, Branch records have been well-used to inform planning and decision-making by land managers. Like the FNCB, they have had a very significant positive impact on the valuing, preservation and restoration of local landscapes.

Whilst members could, and many do, go bird-watching on their own, the Branch is going from strength to strength. Strong friendships grow as members share their love of birds, nature and favourite bird-watching spots, have lots of fun and enjoy the opportunity to grow their knowledge of birds, their natural local habitats and how to provide for them in their own gardens.

Amanda gave special thanks to Helen O’Donnell, without whose incredible records and archives this presentation wouldn’t have been possible. She also thanked her husband Ian for helping to compile and summarise some of this information and coming up with the idea of a 40th Anniversary presentation in 2023. John Gregurke got a big shout-out too for his many years of opening the meeting venue, getting the room ready and restoring it at the end of the night, as he still does for us with seemingly boundless energy. Lastly, Amanda warmly thanked Branch members past and present who gave the club purpose and direction and made it a delight to be a member. Thank you, Amanda, for a fascinating presentation!

Western Treatment Plant Excursion 9th February

led by John Gregurke

Thirteen Field Nats were able to travel on this excursion, being thankful to carpool with those who had the necessary entry permits. The day was quite windy but otherwise fine, enabling us to have another very successful day, bird watching in this favourite area. Black swans were in very large numbers as were Shelducks. But good numbers were also seen of Cape Barron Geese, Yellow-billed Spoonbills, Pied Stilts and several Brolgas among the less common birds. There was no sign of the Orange Bellied Parrot this year at the drain outlet!

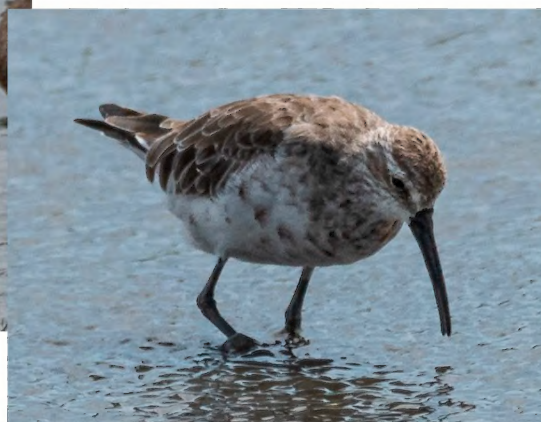
The total number of bird species recorded for the day was 48

A new toilet block has now been built outside the reserve which was welcomed. Lunch was eaten out of the strong wind in the bird-hide which overlooked the bay.

Carol Hall again submitted some great photos from the day to illustrate our Newsletter.



Bar-tailed Godwit (among
Pacific Black Ducks)



Curlew Sandpiper



Yellow-billed
Spoonbill feeding

Musk Duck	White-faced Heron
Pink-eared Duck	Australian White Ibis
Cape Barren Goose	Royal Spoonbill
Black Swan	Yellow-billed Spoonbill
Australian Shelduck	Swamp Harrier
Australian Shoveller	Brolga
Grey Teal	Purple Swamphen
Chestnut Teal	Australian Spotted Crake
Pacific Black Duck	Eurasian Coot
Blue-billed Duck	Pied Oystercatcher
Hoary-headed Grebe	Pied Stilt
Great Crested Grebe	Red-necked Avocet
Crested Pigeon	Red-kneed Dotterel
Little Pied Cormorant	Masked Lapwing
Great Cormorant	Bar-tailed Godwit
Eastern Great Egret	Red-necked Stint
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	Common Starling
Curlew Sandpiper	Welcome Swallow
Pacific Gull	Fairy Martin
Silver Gull	Little Raven
Superb Fairy-wren	Magpie-lark
Red-browed Finch	Willie Wagtail
Australian Magpie	Australian Pelican
White-fronted Chat	House Sparrow



Brolgas



Great Egret



Cape Barren Geese in flight



Pink-eared Ducks



Royal Spoonbills



Red-kneed Dotterel

Inaturalist Update

At a January Inaturalist world-wide seminar, members submitting images were asked to take another step following the uploading of your images. On the observation page where you can view your data and map, there is an area bottom right which is labelled *Annotations*. If possible, you are asked to click *Select* to give information on the flowers, buds and leaves using your submitted images. This data can then be collected over periods of months and years to compare flowering times and other changes according to seasons and climate.

Excerpts from the FNCB Club Meeting Minutes held 7.30pm, February 7th, 2025 in person and via Zoom

Opening and Apologies

Acting Chairperson Neville Oddie welcomed the 24 members and four visitors attending in person and the six members tuned in via Zoom.

Apologies: Andrew Grant, Shirley Faull and Mark Moravec.

Guest Speaker: Amanda Ashton, an active 31-year member and current Publicity Officer of BirdLife Ballarat presented “Forty years of Ballarat Birdwatching” after this auspicious milestone was reached by this Branch of BirdLife Australia in December 2023. Emily volunteered to write up this presentation for the newsletter.

Business Arising from Previous Club Meeting on December 6, 2024

- Club Secretary finalised and sent a letter to the Hon. Catherine King MP and Heath Steward, City of Ballarat requesting reduction in speed limit along Morgan St, Sebastopol adjoining a new wetland to improve safety for wildlife. Happily, Council agreed with our recommendations and within the next two weeks it will be reduced from 80kph to 60kph as requested.

- Club Secretary to prepare a letter to The Courier celebrating Nature Notes and Roger Thomas’s contributions and requesting that the column be continued. Emily confessed that every time she sat down to write this letter, sadness overwhelmed her and consequently she hadn’t yet managed to prepare this significant missive. Claire echoed this experience when she tried to write a similar letter to The Courier. Given the perceived importance of this letter, Emily asked for anyone who thought they could help prepare it to get in touch with her.

Business Arising from Correspondence:

- Discussed renewal of FNCB membership with the Friends of Canadian Corridor for \$20.

Motion: That FNCB renew its membership of FOCC. Carried.

- Discussed FNCB’s renewal of membership of Field Naturalists’ Club of Victoria.

Motion: That FNCB renew its membership of FNCV for \$105.00. Carried.

Reports:

Treasurer's Report

Opening bal. as at Dec. 6, 2024: \$8,075.67
Income \$2,648.12
Expenses: \$341.97
Closing bal.: \$10,381.82

Treasurer's Report- Discovering Ballarat's Bushland Expenses and Income

Total Expenses to date: \$6,118.75
Total Income to date: \$8,632.00
Amounts owing for books already sold: \$540.00
Current Profit: \$2,513.25 – Amazing!

Kathy thanked the many members supporting the sales effort.

Kathy also noted that she will present a separate report on SEANA Spring Camp Expenses and Income when there are enough transactions to warrant it.

Motion: That the two Treasurer's Reports as summarised above be accepted & tabled invoices be approved for payment. Carried.

General Business

Sunday 9th February field trip, 8.30am–4.30pm: “Birds of the Western Treatment Plant” to be led by John Gregurke. John will document the birds observed on this field trip for the newsletter. After scoping the field trip, John noted that there were more Shelduck and Brolga there than usual along with Blue-billed Ducks. He anticipated that at least 50 bird species and 1000's of birds would be observed.

Planning for next year's Calendar of Activities is progressing. Please let a Committee member know ASAP if you would like to present a talk to members or lead a field trip this year, or have any suggestions for speakers, field trip destinations or leaders.

Planning for October 2025's SEANA Camp to be hosted by our Club: Kathy provided an update, noting that the sub-committee is progressing well with arrangements. Venues for presentations and dinners on both nights, registrations and daily meeting points have been booked. There is still time to suggest suitable destinations for half/ full-day excursions and/ or volunteer as a field trip leader.

Our next meeting is the Annual General Meeting. All Committee positions including Office-bearing roles will be declared vacant. Please consider volunteering to serve your club on the Committee. Committee Nomination Forms were available at the meeting and will be available on the night of the AGM too.

Upcoming Event information from Judith Bailey: Early notice- During International Dark Sky Week on Thursday 17th – Thursday 24th April, there will possibly be a moth research event in Woowookarung Regional Park, using UV equipment in partnership with Leigh Catchment Group and recording nocturnal observations on iNaturalist. Night sky observation will also be undertaken if the sky is clear.

Carol has spoken to Susan Kruss about getting a hard copy of her PhD Thesis “A Voice for Nature: A History of the Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat” for the Club Library. Susan provided the name of the printer/ binder often used for this purpose for theses. Everyone agreed that it would be good to have a bound hardcopy in the Club’s library as a long-term resource, given the comprehensive information on our Club’s history contained therein. A couple of members also expressed interest in getting a hardcopy for their own libraries.

Motion: That the Club proceeds to get a hardcopy of Susan’s PhD Thesis printed and bound for the Club library at the Club’s expense and organises printing and binding of hardcopies at the same time for any members who would like a personal copy, at their expense.

Moved: R. Thomas **Seconded:** C. Hall **Carried.**

Neville noted that Roger Permezel from the Friends of Buninyong Botanic Gardens had got in touch with him to let him know about the City of Ballarat’s heavy-engineering plans to flood-proof The Gong in Buninyong to the detriment of the historical and environmental values of The Gong and the Buninyong Botanic Gardens (including permanent removal of 100 trees). Roger is seeking any flora or fauna data that Club members hold on those reserves to strengthen a case for implementation of less drastic measures to reduce the risk of a flood resulting from a breach of the dam wall of The Gong. If you have any relevant records, please email them to him. Angela noted that there is a petition online that members might like to sign (just search “Friends of Buninyong Botanic Gardens petition” in Google).

Show & Tell/ Field Reports

Andy reported several sightings and submitted a photo of an impressive stingray identified on iNaturalist as a Smooth Stingray *Bathytoshia brevicaudata* whilst fishing in the Moyne River at Port Fairy.

•

- Carol reported observing a Baillon's Crake in Fairyland at Lake Wendouree, the first time she had seen this species there.

Roger acknowledged that he couldn't remember a report of the species in that location, with only rare sightings previously on the mud islands in the centre of the Lake.

Next Meeting: Annual General Meeting followed by Club Meeting featuring "Member's Images: Natural Jewels of the Australian Desert" to be presented by members.

When? Friday 7th March 2025, 7.30pm in person at the Federation University building at the corner of Gillies St & Gregory St, Wendouree or via Zoom if you prefer.

Meeting closed: 9.14pm.



Smooth Stingray

- *Discovering Ballarat's Bushland book sales*

Thank you to all members who have purchased one or more copies of our latest publication, *Discovering Ballarat's Bushland*, 2nd edition.

We have also secured the help of some local outlets to sell the book. They include:- Collins Books, Lydiard St & Bridge Mall, Tourist Info Centre Sturt Street, Eureka Centre Gift Shop, Buninyong Tourist Info centre
FNC Members \$12 Retail \$15

2025/26 Syllabus and SEANA Planning The committee have made good progress in contacting potential guest speakers with the dates nearly filled. Excursions are also being planned and we continue to welcome ideas and volunteers to lead them. Once consolidated, we will send the list to members. *We also hope many members will volunteer to write up notes on those speaker's presentations or the field trips for our Newsletter each month. If insecure about doing this, others will be glad to assist with editing*

Ballarat SEANA 17-19th Oct update

Keynote speakers— Nicole Kearney from the Biodiversity Heritage-Library has agreed to be our speaker on the Friday night and Richard Weatherly on the Saturday evening following the dinner.

Our Next meeting is Friday 7th March: being our AGM followed by the Club Meeting.

Members are encouraged to submit about 12 photos on a usb stick or bring objects that might fit the theme of “ **Natural Jewels of the Australian Desert**”.

If you wish to attend online, please email your images to Graeme before the meeting or be prepared to screen share.

Can participating members please write-up your own five-minute presentations for the Newsletter.

Sunday 9th Mar. field trip- 9.30am - 3.00pm

Destinations: North Garden Wetlands, Lake Wendouree and Macarthur Park Wetlands
To be led by Roger Thomas

Depart Fed Uni carpark **on foot** at 9.30am sharp, doing a circuit around North Garden Wetlands then back to the cars. Drive to Lake Wendouree area for morning tea (toilets available) - *The Begonia Festival will be on*. Then have a walk through Fairyland to Piper's until 12.15pm. Next drive to Macarthur Park Wetlands, Waterford Drive, Miners Rest for lunch at 12.30pm followed by a walk around the wetlands. Return to Fed Uni carpark by 3pm.

Sturdy shoes, hat, sunscreen, insect repellent, water bottle, camp chair, thermos, morning tea and lunch, binoculars, cameras and field guides are recommended.

Meetings and Excursions

Fri Mar 7th AGM & Member's Images: : *Natural jewels of the Australian desert*

Sun Mar 9th Ballarat Wetlands led by Roger Thomas

Future events

Fri April 4th Guest Speaker Corinne Proske-
Trust for Nature's History, Vision and Reserves

Sun April 6th field trip led by Neville Oddie to Mt Elephant area

Volunteers are needed to write up these events for our newsletter please.

Next Committee meeting Tues Mar 25th at 7.30 pm on zoom

Club meetings are normally held on 1st Friday of the month at 7.30 pm at the Federation Uni Gillies St Campus (corner of Gillies and Gregory Sts, Lake Wendouree),

Committee

President	Position Vacant
Secretary	Emily Noble
Treasurer	Kathy Elder
Committee	Andy Arnold
	Margaret Rich
	Val Hocking
	Graeme Lunt
	Sheree Cartledge
	Neville Oddie
	Max Thompson

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Editor: Val Hocking

Treasurer Kathy Elder

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Club email: ballaratfnc@gmail.com

Meetings - in person and may continue to be held via Zoom.
Members will be kept informed of arrangements each month.

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